



# THE EARTH COMPELS

*by the same author*

★ .

POEMS

OUT OF THE PICTURE

# THE EARTH COMPELS

poems by  
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To  
NANCY



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δυσέρωτες δὴ φαινόμεθ' ὅντες  
τοῦδ' ὅ τι τοῦτο στίλβει κατὰ γῆν



## Carrickfergus

I was born in Belfast between the mountain and the  
gantries

To the hooting of lost sirens and the clang of trams:  
Thence to Smoky Carrick in County Antrim  
Where the bottle-neck harbour collects the mud which  
jams

The little boats beneath the Norman castle,  
The pier shining with lumps of crystal salt;  
The Scotch Quarter was a line of residential houses  
But the Irish Quarter was a slum for the blind and halt.

The brook ran yellow from the factory stinking of  
chlorine,  
The yarn-mill called its funeral cry at noon;  
Our lights looked over the lough to the lights of Bangor  
Under the peacock aura of a drowning moon.

The Norman walled this town against the country  
To stop his ears to the yelping of his slave  
And built a church in the form of a cross but denoting  
The list of Christ on the cross, in the angle of the nave.

I was the rector's son, born to the anglican order,  
Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor;  
The Chichesters knelt in marble at the end of a transept  
With ruffs about their necks, their portion sure.

The war came and a huge camp of soldiers  
Grew from the ground in sight of our house with long  
Dummies hanging from gibbets for bayonet practice  
And the sentry's challenge echoing all day long;



## June Thunder

The Junes were free and full, driving through tiny  
Roads, the mudguards brushing the cowparsley,  
Through fields of mustard and under boldly embattled  
Mays and chestnuts

Or between beeches verdurous and voluptuous  
Or where broom and gorse beflagged the chalkland—  
All the flare and gusto of the unenduring  
Joys of a season

Now returned but I note as more appropriate  
To the maturer mood impending thunder  
With an indigo sky and the garden hushed except for  
The treetops moving.

Then the curtains in my room blow suddenly inward,  
The shrubbery rustles, birds fly heavily homeward,  
The white flowers fade to nothing on the trees and rain comes  
Down like a dropscene.

Now there comes the catharsis, the cleansing downpour  
Breaking the blossoms of our overdated fancies  
Our old sentimentality and whimsicality  
Loves of the morning.

Blackness at half-past eight, the night's precursor,  
Clouds like falling masonry and lightning's lavish  
Annunciation, the sword of the mad archangel  
Flashed from the scabbard.

If only you would come and dare the crystal  
Rampart of rain and the bottomless moat of thunder,  
If only now you would come I should be happy  
Now if now only.

## The Sunlight on the Garden

The sunlight on the garden  
Hardens and grows cold,  
We cannot cage the minute  
Within its nets of gold,  
When all is told  
We cannot beg for pardon.

Our freedom as free lances  
Advances towards its end;  
The earth compels, upon it  
Sonnets and birds descend;  
And soon, my friend,  
We shall have no time for dances.

The sky was good for flying  
Defying the church bells  
And every evil iron  
Siren and what it tells:  
The earth compels,  
We are dying, Egypt, dying

And not expecting pardon,  
Hardened in heart anew,  
But glad to have sat under  
Thunder and rain with you,  
And grateful too  
For sunlight on the garden.

## Chess

At the penultimate move, their saga nearly sung,  
They have worked so hard to prove what lads they were  
when young,  
Have looked up every word in order to be able to say  
The gay address unheard when they were dumb and gay.  
Your Castle to King's Fourth under your practised hand!  
What is the practice worth, so few being left to stand?  
Better the raw levies jostling in the square  
Than two old men in a crevice sniping at empty air;  
The veterans on the pavement puff their cheeks and blow  
The music of enslavement that echoes back 'I told you so';  
The chapped hands fumble flutes, the tattered posters cry  
Their craving for recruits who have not had time to die.  
While our armies differ they move and feel the sun,  
The victor is a cypher once the war is won.  
Choose your gambit, vary the tactics of your game,  
You move in a closed ambit that always ends the same.

## The Heated Minutes

The heated minutes climb  
The anxious hill,  
The tills fill up with cash,  
The tiny hammers chime  
The bells of good and ill,  
And the world piles with ash  
From fingers killing time.

If you were only here  
Among these rocks,  
I should not feel the dull  
The taut and ticking fear  
That hides in all the clocks  
And creeps inside the skull—  
If you were here, my dear.

## Iceland

No shields now  
Cross the knoll,  
The hills are dull  
With leaden shale,  
Whose arms could squeeze  
The breath from time  
And the climb is long  
From cairn to cairn.

Houses are few  
But decorous  
In a ruined land  
Of sphagnum moss;  
Corrugated iron  
Farms inherit  
The spirit and phrase  
Of ancient sagas.

Men have forgotten  
Anger and ambush,  
To make ends meet  
Their only business:  
The lover riding  
In the lonely dale  
Hears the plover's  
Single pipe  
  
And feels perhaps  
But undefined  
The drift of death  
In the sombre wind

Deflating the trim  
Balloon of lust  
In a grey storm  
Of dust and grit.

So we who have come  
As trippers North  
Have minds no match  
For this land's girth;  
The glacier's licking  
Tongues deride  
Our pride of life,  
Our flashy songs.

But the people themselves  
Who live here  
Ignore the brooding  
Fear, the sphinx;  
And the radio  
With tags of tune  
Defies their pillared  
Basalt crags.

Whose ancestors  
Thought that at last  
The end would come  
To a blast of horns  
And gods would face  
The worst in fight,  
Vanish in the night  
The last, the first

Night which began  
Without device  
In ice and rocks,  
No shade or shape;  
Grass and blood,  
The strife of life,  
Were an interlude  
Which soon must pass

And all go back  
Relapse to rock  
Under the shawl  
Of the ice-caps,  
The cape which night  
Will spread to cover  
The world when the living  
Flags are furled.

## Solvitur Acris Hiems

(*Horace, Odes, I. 4*)

Winter to Spring: the west wind melts the frozen rancour,  
The windlass drags to sea the thirsty hull;  
Byre is no longer welcome to beast or fire to ploughman,  
The field removes the frost-cap from his skull.

Venus of Cythera leads the dances under the hanging  
Moon and the linked line of Nymphs and Graces  
Beat the ground with measured feet while the busy Fire-  
God  
Stokes his red-hot mills in volcanic places.

Now is the time to twine the spruce and shining head with  
myrtle,  
Now with flowers escaped the earthy fetter,  
And sacrifice to the woodland god in shady copses  
A lamb or a kid, whichever he likes better.

Equally heavy is the heel of white-faced Death on the  
pauper's  
Shack and the towers of kings, and O my dear  
The little sum of life forbids the ravelling of lengthy  
Hopes. Night and the fabled dead are near

And the narrow house of nothing past whose lintel  
You will meet no wine like this, no boy to admire  
Like Lycidas who today makes all young men a furnace  
And whom tomorrow girls will find a fire.

## Passage Steamer

Upon the decks they take beef tea  
Who are so free, so free, so free,  
But down the ladder in the engine-room  
(Doom, doom, doom, doom)  
The great cranks rise and fall, repeat,  
The great cranks plod with their Assyrian feet  
To match the monotonous energy of the sea.

Back from a journey I require  
Some new desire, desire, desire  
But find in the open sea and sun  
None, none, none, none;  
The gulls that bank around the mast  
Insinuate that nothing we pass is past,  
That all our beginnings were long since begun.

And when I think of you, my dear,  
Who were so near, so near, so near,  
The barren skies from wall to wall  
Appal, appal, pall, pall,  
The spray no longer gilds the wave,  
The sea looks nothing more nor less than a grave  
And the world and the day are grey and that is all.

# Circus

## I

### *Perchists*

Intricacy of engines,  
Delicacy of darkness;  
They rise into the tent's  
Top like deep-sea divers

And hooked from the mouth like fish  
Frame their frolic  
Above the silent music  
And the awed audience,

Hang by their teeth  
Beneath the cone of canvas,  
The ring beneath them  
An eye that is empty

Who live in a world  
Of airy technic  
Like dolls or angels  
Sexless and simple

Our fear their frame,  
Hallowed by handclaps,  
Honoured by eyes  
Upward in incense.

On the tent's walls  
Fourfold shadowed  
In a crucifixion's  
Endless moment

Intricacy of,  
Delicacy of,  
Darkness and engines.

## II

### *Horses*

The long whip lingers,  
Toys with the sawdust;  
The horses amble  
On a disc of dreams.

The drumsticks flower  
In pink percussion  
To mix with the metal  
Petals of brass.

The needle runs  
In narrower circles;  
The long whip leaps  
And leads them inward.

Piebald horses  
And ribald music  
Circle around  
A spangled lady.

## III

### *Clowns*

Clowns, Clowns and  
Clowns  
A firm that furthers  
Nobody's business

Zanies by royal  
Charter and adept  
At false addition  
And gay combustion

With bladders for batons  
And upright eyebrows  
Flappers for feet  
And figs for no one.

The child's face pops  
Like ginger beer  
To see the air  
Alive with bowlers.

Bric-a-brac  
Pick-a-back  
Spillbucket  
Splits.

#### IV

##### *Elephants*

Tonnage of instinctive  
Wisdom in tinsel,  
Trunks like questions  
And legs like tree trunks

On each forehead  
A buxom blonde  
And round each leg  
A jangle of bells,

Deep in each brain  
A chart of tropic  
Swamp and twilight  
Of creepered curtains,

Shamble in shoddy  
Finery forward  
And make their salaams  
To the tiers of people—

Dummies with a reflex  
Muscle of laughter  
When they see the mountains  
Come to Mahomet . . .

Efficacy of engines,  
Obstinacy of darkness.

## Homage to Clichés

With all this clamour for progress  
This hammering out of new phases and gadgets, new  
trinkets and phrases  
I prefer the automatic, the reflex, the cliché of velvet.  
The foreseen smile, sexual, maternal, or hail-fellow-met  
The cat's fur sparking under your hand  
And the indolent delicacy of your hand  
These fish coming in to the net  
I can see them coming for yards  
The way that you answer, the way that you dangle your  
foot  
These fish that are rainbow and fat  
One can catch in the hand and caress and return to the pool.  
So five minutes spent at a bar  
Watching the fish coming in, as you parry and shrug  
This is on me or this is on me,  
Or an old man momentously sharpens a pencil as though  
He were not merely licking his fur like a cat—  
The cat's tongue curls to the back of its neck, the fish  
swivel round by the side of their tails, on the abbey  
the arrows of gold  
On the pinnacles shift in the wind—  
This is on me this time  
Watch how your flattery logic seduction or wit  
Elicit the expected response  
Each tiny hammer of the abbey chime  
Beating on the outer shell of the eternal bell  
Which hangs like a Rameses, does not deign to move  
For Mahomet comes to the mountain and the fish come to  
the bell.  
What will you have now? The same again?

A finger can pull these ropes,  
A gin and lime or a double Scotch  
Watch the response, the lifting wrist the clink and smile  
The fish come in, the hammered notes come out  
From a filigree gothic trap.  
These are the moments that are anaplerotic, these are the  
    gifts to be accepted  
Remembering the qualification  
That everything is not true to type like these  
That the pattern and the patina of these  
Are superseded in the end.  
Stoop your head, follow me through this door  
Up the belfry stair.  
What do you see in this gloom, this womb of stone?  
I see eight bells hanging alone.  
Eight black panthers, eight silences  
On the outer shell of which our fingers via hammers  
Rapping with an impertinent precision  
Have made believe that this was the final music.  
Final as if finality was the trend of fish  
That always seek the net  
As if finality was the obvious gag  
The audience laughing in anticipation  
As if finality was the angled smile  
Drawn from the dappled stream of casual meetings  
(Yet oh thank God for such)  
But there is this much left over  
There is very much left over :  
The Rameses, the panther, the two-ton bell  
Will never move his sceptre  
Never spring, never swing  
No, no, he will never move . . .  
What will you have, my dear? The same again?

Two more double Scotch, watch the approved response  
This is the preferred mode  
I have shut the little window that looks up the road  
Towards the tombs of the kings  
For I have heard that you meet people walking in granite  
I have shut up the gates under padlock  
For fear of wild beasts  
And I have shut my ears to the possible peal of bells,  
Every precaution—  
What will you have, my dear? The same again?  
Count up our fag-ends  
This year next year sometime never  
Next year is this year, sometime is next time, never is  
sometime  
Never is the Bell, Never is the Panther, Never is Rameses  
Oh the cold stone panic of Never—  
The ringers are taking off their coats, the panther  
crouches  
The granite sceptre is very slightly inclining  
As our shoes tap against the bar and our glasses  
Make two new rings of wet upon the counter  
Somewhere behind us stands a man, a counter  
A timekeeper with a watch and a pistol  
Ready to shoot and with his shot destroy  
This whole delightful world of cliché and refrain—  
What will you have, my dear? The same again?

## On those Islands

On those islands

The west wind drops its messages of indolence  
No one hurries, the Gulf Stream warms the gnarled  
Rampart of gneiss, the feet of the peasant years  
Pad up and down their sentry-beat not challenging  
Any comer for the password—only Death  
Comes through unchallenged in his general's cape.  
The houses straggle on the umber moors,  
The Aladdin lamp mutters in the boarded room  
Where a woman smoors the fire of fragrant peat.  
No one repeats the password for it is known,  
All is known before it comes to the lips—  
Instinctive wisdom. Over the fancy vases  
The photos with the wrinkles taken out,  
The enlarged portraits of the successful sons  
Who married wealth in Toronto or New York,  
Cajole the lonely evenings of the old  
Who live embanked by memories of labour  
And child-bearing and scriptural commentaries.

On those islands

The boys go poaching their ancestral rights—  
The Ossianic salmon who take the yellow  
Tilt of the river with a magnet's purpose—  
And listen breathless to the tales at the ceilidh  
Among the peat-smoke and the smells of dung  
That fill the felted room from the cave of the byre.  
No window opens of the windows sunk like eyes  
In a four-foot wall of stones casually picked  
From the knuckly hills on which these houses crawl  
Like black and legless beasts who breathe in their sleep  
Among the piles of peat and pooks of hay—

A brave oasis in the indifferent moors.  
And while the stories circulate like smoke,  
The sense of life spreads out from the one-eyed house  
In wider circles through the lake of night  
In which articulate man has dropped a stone—  
In wider circles round the black-faced sheep,  
Wider and fainter till they hardly crease  
The ebony heritage of the herded dead.

On those islands  
The tinkers whom no decent girl will go with,  
Preserve the Gaelic tunes unspoiled by contact  
With the folk-fancier or the friendly tourist,  
And preserve the knowledge of horse-flesh and preserve  
The uncompromising empire of the rogue.

On those islands  
The tethered cow grazes among the orchises  
And figures in blue calico turn by hand  
The ground beyond the plough, and the bus, not stopping,  
Drops a parcel for the lonely household  
Where men remembering stories of eviction  
Are glad to have their land though mainly stones—  
The honoured bones which still can hoist a body.

On those islands  
There is echo of the leaping fish, the identical  
Sound that cheered the chiefs at ease from slaughter:  
There is echo of baying hounds of a lost breed  
And echo of MacCrimmon's pipes lost in the cave;  
And seals cry with the voices of the drowned.  
When men go out to fish, no one must say 'Good luck'  
And the confidences told in a boat at sea  
Must be as if printed on the white ribbon of a wave  
Withdrawn as soon as printed—so never heard.

On those islands

The black minister paints the tour of hell  
While the unregenerate drink from the bottle's neck  
In gulps like gauntlets thrown at the devil's head  
And spread their traditional songs across the hills  
Like fraying tapestries of fights and loves,  
The boar-hunt and the rope let down at night—  
Lost causes and lingering home-sickness.

On those islands

The fish come singing from the drunken sea,  
The herring rush the gunwales and sort themselves  
To cram the expectant barrels of their own accord—  
Or such is the dream of the fisherman whose wet  
Leggings hang on the door as he sleeps returned  
From a night when miles of net were drawn up empty.

On those islands

A girl with candid eyes goes out to marry  
An independent tenant of seven acres  
Who goes each year to the south to work on the roads  
In order to raise a rent of forty shillings,  
And all the neighbours celebrate their wedding  
With drink and pipes and the walls of the barn reflect  
The crazy shadows of the whooping dancers.

On those islands

Where many live on the dole or on old-age pensions  
And many waste with consumption and some are drowned  
And some of the old stumble in the midst of sleep  
Into the pot-hole hitherto shunned in dreams  
Or falling from the cliff among the shrieks of gulls  
Reach the bottom before they have time to wake—  
Whoever dies on the islands and however  
The whole of the village goes into three day mourning,  
The afflicted home is honoured and the shops are shut  
For on those islands

Where a few surnames cover a host of people  
And the art of being a stranger with your neighbour  
Has still to be imported, death is still  
No lottery ticket in a public lottery—  
The result to be read on the front page of a journal—  
But a family matter near to the whole family.  
On those islands  
Where no train runs on rails and the tyrant time  
Has no clock-towers to signal people to doom  
With semaphore ultimatums tick by tick,  
There is still peace though not for me and not  
Perhaps for long—still peace on the bevel hills  
For those who still can live as their fathers lived  
On those islands.

## Eclogue from Iceland

*Scene: The Arnarvatn Heath. Craven, Ryan and the ghost of Grettir. Voice from Europe.*

- R. This is the place, Craven, the end of our way;  
Hobble the horses, we have had a long day.
- C. The night is closing like a fist  
And the long glacier lost in mist.
- R. Few folk come this time of year.  
What are those limping steps I hear?
- C. Look, there he is coming now.  
We shall have some company anyhow.
- R. It must be the mist—he looks so big;  
He is walking lame in the left leg.
- G. Good evening, strangers. So you too  
Are on the run? I welcome you.  
I am Grettir Asmundson,  
Dead many years. My day is done.  
But you whose day is sputtering yet  
I forget. . . . What did I say?  
We forget when we are dead  
The blue and red, the grey and gay.  
Your day spits with a damp wick,  
Will fizz out if you're not quick.  
Men have been chilled to death who kissed  
Wives of mist, forgetting their own  
Kind who live out of the wind.  
My memory goes, goes—Tell me  
Are there men now whose compass leads  
Them always down forbidden roads?  
Greedy young men who take their pick  
Of what they want but have no luck;  
Who leap the toothed and dour crevasse

Of death on a sardonic phrase?  
You with crowsfeet round your eyes  
How are things where you come from?

C. Things are bad. There is no room  
To move at ease, to stretch or breed—

G. And you with the burglar's underlip  
In your land do things stand well?

R. In my land nothing stands at all  
But some fly high and some lie low.

G. Too many people. My memory will go,  
Lose itself in the hordes of modern people.  
Memory is words; we remember what others  
Say and record of ourselves—stones with the runes.  
Too many people—sandstorm over the words.  
Is your land also an island?  
There is only hope for people who live upon islands  
Where the Lowest Common labels will not stick  
And the unpolluted hills will hold your echo.

R. I come from an island, Ireland, a nation  
Built upon violence and morose vendettas.  
My diehard countrymen like drayhorses  
Drag their ruin behind them.  
'Shooting straight in the cause of crooked thinking  
Their greed is sugared with pretence of public  
spirit.

From all which I am an exile.

C. Yes, we are exiles,  
Gad the world for comfort.  
This Easter I was in Spain before the Civil War  
Gobbling the tripper's treats, the local colour,  
Storks over Avila, the coffee-coloured waters of  
Ronda,  
The comedy of the bootblacks in the cafés,

The legless beggars in the corridors of the trains  
Dominoes on marble tables, the architecture  
Moorish mudéjar churrigueresque,  
The bullfight—the banderillas like Christmas  
candles,  
And the scrawled hammer and sickle:  
It was all copy—impenetrable surface.  
I did not look for the sneer beneath the surface.  
Why should I trouble, an addict to oblivion  
Running away from the gods of my own hearth  
With no intention of finding gods elsewhere?

R. And so we came to Iceland—  
C. Our latest joyride.  
G. And what have you found in Iceland?  
C. What have we found? More copy, more surface,  
Vignettes as they call them, ~~dead flowers in an~~✓  
album—  
The harmoniums in the farms, the fine-bread  
and pancakes  
The pot of ivy trained across the window,  
Children in gumboots, girls in black berets.  
R. And dead craters and angled crags.  
G. The crags which saw me jockey doom for twenty  
Years from one cold hide-out to another;  
The last of the saga heroes  
Who had not the wisdom of Njal or the beauty of  
Gunnar  
I was the doomed tough, disaster kept me witty;  
Being born the surly jack, the ne'er-do-well, the  
loiterer  
Hard blows exalted me.  
When the man of will and muscle achieves the  
curule chair

He turns to a bully ; better is his lot as outlaw  
A wad of dried fish in his belt, a snatch of bil-  
berries

And riding the sullen landscape far from friends  
Through the jungle of lava, dales of frozen fancy,  
Fording the gletcher, ducking the hard hail,  
And across the easy pastures, never stopping  
To rest among the celandines and bogcotton.  
Under a curse I would see eyes in the night,  
Always had to move on; craving company  
In the end I lived on an island with two others.  
To fetch fire I swam the crinkled fjord,  
The crags were alive with ravens whose low croak  
Told my ears what filtered in my veins—  
The sense of doom. I wore it gracefully,  
The fatal clarity that would not budge  
But without false pride in martyrdom. For I,  
Joker and dressy, held no mystic's pose,  
Not wishing to die preferred the daily goods  
The horse-fight, women's thighs, a joint of meat.  
But this dyspeptic age of ingrown cynics  
Wakes in the morning with a coated tongue  
And whets itself laboriously to labour  
And wears a blasé face in the face of death.  
Who risk their lives neither to fill their bellies  
Nor to avenge an affront nor grab a prize  
But out of bravado or to divert ennui  
Driving fast cars and climbing foreign mountains.  
Outside the delicatessen shop the hero  
With his ribbons and his empty pinned-up sleeve  
Cadge for money while with turned-up collars  
His comrades blow through brass the London-  
derry air

And silken legs and swinging buttocks advertise  
The sale of little cardboard flags on pins.

G. Us too they sold  
The women and the men with many sheep.  
Graft and aggression, legal prevarication  
Drove out the best of us,  
Secured long life to only the sly and the dumb  
To those who would not say what they really  
thought

But got their ends through pretended indifference  
And through the sweat and blood of thralls and  
hacks

Cheating the poor men of their share of drift  
The whale on Kaldbak in the starving winter.

R. And so today at Grimsby men whose lives  
Are warped in Arctic trawlers load and unload  
The shining tons of fish to keep the lords  
Of the market happy with cigars and cars.

C. What is that music in the air—  
Organ-music coming from far?

R. Honeyed music—it sounds to me  
Like the Wurlitzer in the Gaiety.

G. I do not hear anything at all.

C. Imagine the purple light on the stage

R. The melting moment of a stinted age

C. The pause before the film again  
Bursts in a shower of golden rain.

G. I do not hear anything at all.

C. We shall be back there soon, to stand in queues  
For entertainment and to work at desks,  
To browse round counters of dead books, to pore  
On picture catalogues and Soho menus,  
To preen ourselves on the reinterpretation

Of the words of obsolete interpreters,  
Collate delete their faded lives like texts,  
Admire Flaubert, Cézanne—the tortured artists—  
And leaning forward to knock out our pipes  
Into the fire protest that art is good  
And gives a meaning and a slant to life.

G. The dark is falling. Soon the air  
Will stare with eyes, the stubborn ghost  
Who cursed me when I threw him. Must  
The ban go on forever? I,  
A ghost myself, have no claim now to die.

R. Now I hear the music again—  
Strauss and roses—hear it plain.  
The sweet confetti of music falls  
From the high Corinthian capitals.

C. Her head upon his shoulder lies. . . .  
Blend to the marrow as the music dies.

G. Brought up to the rough-house we took offence  
quickly  
Were sticklers for pride, paid for it as outlaws—

C. Like Cavalcanti whose hot blood lost him  
Florence

R. Or the Wild Geese of Ireland in Mid-Europe.  
Let us thank God for valour in abstraction  
For those who go their own way, will not kiss  
The arse of law and order nor compound  
For physical comfort at the price of pride:  
Soldiers of fortune, renegade artists, rebels and  
sharers  
Whose speech not cramped to Yea and Nay ex-  
plodes  
In crimson oaths like peonies, who brag  
Because they prefer to taunt the mask of God,

Bid him unmask and die in the living lightning.  
What is that voice maundering, meandering?

VOICE. Blues . . . blues . . . high heels and manicured  
hands

Always self-conscious of the vanity bag  
And puritan painted lips that abnegate desire  
And say 'we do not care' . . . 'we do not care'—  
I don't care always in the air  
Give my hips a shake always on the make  
Always on the mend coming around the bend  
Always on the dance with an eye to the main  
Chance, always taking the floor again—

C. There was Tchekov,  
His haemorrhages drove him out of Moscow  
The life he loved, not born to it, who thought  
That when the windows blurred with smoke and  
talk

So that no-one could see out, then conversely  
The giants of frost and satans of the peasant  
Could not look in, impose the evil eye.

R. There was MacKenna  
Spent twenty years translating Greek philosophy  
Ill and tormented, unwilling to break contract,  
A brilliant talker who left  
The salon for the solo flight of Mind.

G. There was Onund Treefoot  
Came late and lame to Iceland, made his way  
Even though the land was bad and the neigh-  
bours jealous

C. There was that dancer  
Who danced the War, then falling into coma  
Went with hunched shoulders through the ivory  
gate.

R. There was Connolly  
Vilified now by the gangs of Catholic Action.

G. There was Egil  
Hero and miser who when dying blind  
Would have thrown his money among the crowd  
to hear  
The whole world scuffle for his hoarded gold.

C. And there were many  
Whose commonsense or sense of humour or mere  
Desire for self assertion won them through

R. But not to happiness. Though at intervals  
They paused in sunlight for a moment's fusion  
With friends or nature till the cynical wind  
Blew the trees pale—

VOICE. Blues, blues, sit back, relax  
Let your self-pity swell with the music and clutch  
Your tiny lavandered fetishes. Who cares  
If floods depopulate China? I don't care  
Always in the air sitting among the stars  
Among the electric signs among the imported  
wines  
Always on the spree climbing the forbidden tree  
Tossing the peel of the apple over my shoulder  
To see it form the initials of a new intrigue

G. Runes and runes which no-one could decode

R. Wrong numbers on the 'phone—she never  
answered.

C. And from the romantic grill (Spanish baroque)  
Only the eyes looked out which I see now.

G. You see them now?

C. But seen before as well.

G. And many times to come, be sure of that.

R. I know them too

These eyes which hang in the northern mist, the  
brute

Stare of stupidity and hate, the most  
Primitive and false of oracles.

C. The eyes

That glide like snakes behind a thousand  
masks—

All human faces fit them, here or here:  
Dictator, bullying schoolboy or common lout,  
Acquisitive women, financiers, invalids,  
Are capable all of that compelling stare  
Stare which betrays the cosmic purposelessness ✓

The nightmare noise of the scythe upon the  
hone,

Time sharpening his blade among high rocks  
alone.

R. The face that fate hangs as a figurehead  
Above the truncheon or the nickelled death.

G. I won the fall. Though cursed for it, I won.

C. Which is why we honour you who working from  
The common premisses did not end with many  
In the blind alley where the trek began.

G. Though the open road is hard with frost and dark.

VOICE. Hot towels for the men, mud packs for the  
women

Will smooth the puckered minutes of your lives.  
I offer you each a private window, a view  
(The leper window reveals a church of lepers).

R. Do you believe him?

C. I don't know.

Do you believe him?

G. No.

You cannot argue with the eyes or voice;

Argument will frustrate you till you die  
But go your own way, give the voice the lie,  
Outstare the inhuman eyes. That is the way.  
Go back to where you came from and do not keep  
Crossing the road to escape them, do not avoid  
the ambush,  
Take sly detours, but ride the pass direct.

C. But the points of axes shine from the scrub, the  
odds  
Are dead against us. There are the lures of  
women  
Who, half alive, invite to a fuller life  
And never loving would be loved by others.

R. Who fortify themselves in pasteboard castles  
And plant their beds with the cast-out toys of  
children,  
Dead pines with tinsel fruits, nursery beliefs  
And South Sea Island trinkets. Watch their years  
The permutations of lapels and gussets,  
Of stuffs—georgette or velvet or corduroy—  
Of hats and eye-veils, of shoes, lizard or suede,  
Of bracelets, milk or coral, of zip bags  
Of compacts, lipstick, eyeshade and coiffures  
All tributary to the wished ensemble  
The carriage of body that belies the soul.

C. And there are the men who appear to be men of  
sense,  
Good company and dependable in a crisis,  
Who yet are ready to plug you as you drink  
Like dogs who bite from fear; for fear of germs  
Putting on stamps by licking the second finger,  
For fear of opinion overtipping in bars,  
For fear of thought studying stupefaction.

It is the world which these have made where  
dead  
Greek words sprout out in tin on sallow walls—  
Clinic or polytechnic—a world of slums  
Where any day now may see the Gadarene swine  
Rush down the gullets of the London tubes  
When the enemy, x or y, let loose their gas.

G. My friends, hounded like me, I tell you still  
Go back to where you belong. I could have fled  
To the Hebrides or Orkney, been rich and famous,  
Preferred to assert my rights in my own country,  
Mine which were hers for every country stands  
By the sanctity of the individual will.

R. Yes, he is right.

C. But we have not his strength  
R. Could only abase ourselves before the wall  
Of shouting flesh

C. Could only offer our humble  
Deaths to the unknown god, unknown but wor-  
shipped,  
Whose voice calls in the sirens of destroyers.

G. Minute your gesture but it must be made—  
Your hazard, your act of defiance and hymn of  
hate,

Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values,  
Which is now your only duty.

C. Is it our only duty?

G. Yes, my friends.

What did you say? The night falls now and I  
Must beat the dales to chase my remembered  
acts.

Yes, my friends, it is your only duty.  
And, it may be added, it is your only chance.

## Eclogue Between the Motherless

What did you do for the holiday?

I went home.

What did you do?

O, I went home for the holiday.

Had a good time?

Not bad as far as it went.

What about you?

O quite a good time on the whole—

(both) Quite a good time on the whole at home for the  
holiday

As far as it went—In a way it went too far,  
Back to childhood, back to the backwoods mind;  
I could not stand a great deal of it, bars on the  
brain

And the blinds drawn in the drawingroom not to  
fade the chair covers

There were no blinds drawn in ours; my father  
has married again—

A girl of thirty who had never had any lovers  
And wants to have everything bright

That sounds worse than us.

Our old house is just a grass-grown tumulus,  
My father sits by himself with the bossed decanter,  
The garden is going to rack, the gardener  
Only comes three days, most of our money was in  
linen

My new stepmother is wealthy, you should see her  
in jodhpurs

Brisking in to breakfast from a morning canter.  
I don't think he can be happy

How can you tell?

That generation is so different

I suppose your sister

Still keeps house for yours?

Yes and she finds it hell.

Nothing to do in the evenings.

Talking of the evenings

I can drop the ash on the carpet since my divorce.

Never you marry, my boy. One marries only

Because one thinks one is lonely—and so one was

But wait till the lonely are two and no better

As a matter

Of fact I've got to tell you

The first half year

Is heaven come back from the nursery—swans-

down kisses—

But after that one misses something

My dear,

Don't depress me in advance; I've got to tell you—

My wife was warmth, a picture and a dance,

Her body electric—silk used to crackle and her

gloves

Move where she left them. How one loves the sur-

face

But how one lacks the core—Children of course

Might make a difference

Personally I find

I cannot go on any more like I was. Which is why

I took this step in the dark

What step?

I thought

I too might try what you

Don't say that you

And after all this time

Let's start from the start.  
When I went home this time there was nothing  
to do

And so I got haunted. Like a ball of wool  
That kittens have got at, all my growing up  
All the disposed-of process of my past  
Unravelled on the floor—One can't proceed any  
more

Except on a static past; when the ice-floe breaks  
What's the good of walking? Talking of ice  
I remembered my mother standing against the sky  
And saying 'Go back in the house and change  
your shoes'

And I kept having dreams and kept going back in  
the house.

A sense of guilt like a scent—The day I was born  
I suppose that that same hour was full of her  
screams

You're run down

Wait till you hear what I've done.  
It was not only dreams; even the crockery (odd  
It's not all broken by now) and the rustic seat in  
the rockery

With the bark flaked off, all kept reminding me,  
binding

My feet to the floating past. In the night at the  
lodge

A dog was barking as when I was little in the night  
And I could not budge in the bed clothes. Lying  
alone

I felt my legs were paralysed into roots  
And the same cracks in what used to be the  
nursery ceiling

Gave me again the feeling I was young among  
ikons,  
Helpless at the feet of faceless family idols,  
Walking the tightrope over the tiger-pit,  
Running the gauntlet of inherited fears;  
So after all these years I turned in the bed  
And grasped the want of a wife and heard in the  
rain  
On the gravel path the steps of all my mistresses  
And wondered which was coming or was she dead  
And her shoes given to the char which tapped  
through London—  
The black streets mirrored with rain and stained  
with lights.  
I dreamed she came while a train  
Was running behind the trees (with power pro-  
gressing),  
Undressing deftly she slipped cool knees beside me,  
The clipped hair on her neck prickled my tongue  
And the whole room swung like a ship till I woke  
with the window  
Jittering in its frame from the train passing the  
garden  
Carrying its load of souls to a different distance.  
And of others, isolated by associations,  
I thought—the scent of syringa or always wearing  
A hat of fine white straw and never known in  
winter—  
Splinters of memory. When I was little I sorted  
Bits of lustre and glass from the heap behind the  
henhouse;  
They are all distorted now the beautiful sirens  
Mutilated and mute in dream's dissection,

Hanged from pegs in the Bluebeard's closet of the  
brain,  
Never again nonchalantly to open  
The doors of disillusion. Whom recording  
The night marked time, the dog at the lodge kept  
barking  
And as he barked the big cave opened of hell  
Where all their voices were one and stuck at a point  
Like a gramophone needle stuck on a notched  
record.  
I thought 'Can I find a love beyond the family  
And feed her to the bed my mother died in  
Between the tallboys and the vase of honesty  
On which I was born and groped my way from the  
cave  
With a half-eaten fruit in my hand, a passport  
meaning  
Enforced return for periods to that country?  
Or will one's wife also belong to that country  
And can one never find the perfect stranger?  
My complaint was that she stayed a stranger.  
I remember her mostly in the car, stopping by the  
white  
Moons of the petrol pumps, in a camelhair rug  
Comfortable, scented and alien.  
That's what I want,  
Someone immutably alien—  
Send me a woman with haunches out of the jungle  
And frost patterns for fancies  
The hard light of sun upon water in diamonds  
dancing  
And the brute swagger of the sea; let her love be  
the drop

From the cliff of my dream, be the axe on the block  
Be finesse of the ice on the panes of the heart  
Be careless, be callous, be glass frolic of prisms  
Be eyes of guns through lashes of barbed wire,  
Be the gaoler's smile and all that breaks the past.

Odd ideals you have; all I wanted  
Was to get really close but closeness was  
Only a glove on the hand, alien and veinless,  
And yet her empty gloves could move

My next move

Is what I've got to tell you, I picked on the only  
One who would suit and wrote proposing marriage  
Who is she?

But she can't have yet received it;  
She is in India.

India be damned.

What is her name?

I said I cannot offer  
Anything you will want

Why?

and I said

I know in two years' time it will make no differ-  
ence.

I was hardly able to write it at the claw-foot  
table

Where my mother kept her diary. There I sat  
Concocting a gambler's medicine; the afternoon  
was cool,

The ducks drew lines of white on the dull slate of  
the pool

And I sat writing to someone I hardly knew  
And someone I shall never know well. Relying on  
that

I stuck up the envelope, walked down the winding  
drive,

All that was wanted a figurehead, passed by the  
lodge

Where the dog is chained and the gates, relying on  
my mood

To get it posted

Who is the woman?

relying

Who is the woman?

She is dying

Dying of what?

Only a year to live

Forgive me asking

But

Only a year and ten yards down the road  
I made my goal where it has always stood  
Waiting for the last

You must be out of your mind;  
If it were anyone else I should not mind  
Waiting for the last collection before dark  
The pillarbox like an exclamation mark.

## Leaving Barra

The dazzle on the sea, my darling,  
Leads from the western channel  
A carpet of brilliance taking  
My leave for ever of the island.

I never shall visit that island  
✓ Again with its easy tempo—  
The seal sunbathing, the circuit  
Of gulls on the wing for garbage.

I go to a different garbage  
And scuffle for scraps of notice,  
Pretend to ignore the stigma  
That stains my life and my leisure.

For fretful even in leisure  
I fidget for different values,  
Restless as a gull and haunted  
By a hankering after Atlantis.

I do not know that Atlantis  
Unseen and uncomprehended,  
Dimly divined but keenly  
Felt with a phantom hunger.

If only I could crush the hunger  
If only I could lay the phantom  
Then I should no doubt be happy  
Like a fool or a dog or a buddha.

O the self-abnegation of Buddha  
The belief that is disbelieving

The denial of chiaroscuro  
Not giving a damn for existence!

But I would cherish existence  
Loving the beast and the bubble  
Loving the rain and the rainbow,  
Considering philosophy alien.

For all the religions are alien  
That allege that life is a fiction,  
And when we agree in denial  
The cock crows in the morning.

If only I could wake in the morning  
And find I had learned the solution,  
Wake with the knack of knowledge  
Who as yet have only an inkling.

Though some facts foster the inkling—  
The beauty of the moon and music,  
The routine courage of the worker,  
The gay endurance of women,

And you who to me among women  
Stand for so much that I wish for,  
I thank you, my dear, for the example  
Of living like a fugue and moving.

For few are able to keep moving,  
They drag and flag in the traffic;  
While you are alive beyond question  
Like the dazzle on the sea, my darling.

## Hidden Ice

There are few songs for domesticity  
For routine work, money-making or scholarship  
Though these are apt for eulogy or for tragedy.

And I would praise our adaptability  
Who can spend years and years in offices and beds  
Every morning twirling the napkin ring,  
A twitter of inconsequent vitality.

And I would praise our inconceivable stamina  
Who work to the clock and calendar and maintain  
The equilibrium of nerves and notions,  
Our mild bravado in the face of time.

Those who ignore disarm. The domestic ambush  
The pleated lampshade the defeatist clock  
May never be consummated and we may never  
Strike on the rock beneath the calm upholstering.

But some though buoyed by habit, though convoyed  
By habitual faces and hands that help the food  
Or help one with one's coat, have lost their bearings  
Struck hidden ice or currents no one noted.

One was found like Judas kissing flowers  
And one who sat between the clock and the sun  
Lies like a Saint Sebastian full of arrows  
Feathered from his own hobby, his pet hours.

## Taken for Granted

Taken for granted

The household orbit in childhood

The punctual sound of the gong

The round of domestic service.

The lamps were trimmed at six,

Sticks were lavish for firewood,

The cat made bread of my knees,

The housewife shopped in the morning.

The shops were fragrant, the blistered

Vagrant peered in the windows

At tripe like deep-sea plants,

Sausages in ropes of marble.

On the knees of bountiful gods

We lived in the ease of acceptance

Taking until we were twenty

God's plenty for granted.

## Thank You

Thank you, my friendly daemon, close to me as my  
shadow

For the mealy buttercup days in the ancient meadow,  
For the days of my 'teens, the sluice of hearing and seeing,  
The days of topspin drives and physical well-being.

Thank you, my friend, shorter by a head, more placid  
Than me your protégé whose ways are not so lucid,  
My animal angel sure of touch and humour  
With face still tanned from some *primaeval summer*.

Thanks for your sensual poise, your gay assurance,  
Who skating on the lovely wafers of appearance  
Have held my hand, put vetoes upon my reason,  
Sent me to look for berries in the proper season.

Some day you will leave me or, at best, less often  
I shall sense your presence when eyes and nostrils open,  
Less often find your burgling fingers ready  
To pick the locks when mine are too unsteady.

Thank you for the times of contact, for the glamour  
Of pleasure sold by the clock and under the hammer,  
Thank you for bidding for me, for breaking the cordon  
Of spies and sentries round the unravished garden.

And thank you for the abandon of your giving,  
For seeing in the dark, for making this life worth living.

## Books, Do not Look at Me

Books, do not look at me,  
Clock, do not stare;  
The fire's ashes fidget,  
There is sand in the air;  
Drums tell its coming—  
The sandstorm that blows  
From the desert of darkness—  
O in the desert of darkness  
Where is she walking?

Otherwise regular  
Quickening their beat  
The marchers of madness  
Pick up their feet,  
Make for my table  
And the empty chair  
That faces me—Where,  
Where and why is she absent  
Leaving it empty?

Dial her number,  
None will reply;  
In the shrivelled world  
There is only I;  
Her voice is frozen,  
Hangs in my brain  
On the crags of memory—  
O my dear, go away  
From the crags of memory.

## Only let it Form

Only let it form within his hands once more—  
The moment cradled like a brandy glass.  
Sitting alone in the empty dining hall . . .  
From the chandeliers the snow begins to fall  
Piling around carafes and table legs  
And chokes the passage of the revolving door.  
The last diner, like a ventriloquist's doll  
Left by his master, gazes before him, begs:  
'Only let it form within my hands once more.'

## Now that the Shapes of Mist

Now that the shapes of mist like hooded beggar-children  
Slink quickly along the middle of the road  
And the lamps draw trails of milk in ponds of lustrous lead  
I am decidedly pleased not to be dead.

Or when wet roads at night reflect the clutching  
Importunate fingers of trees and windy shadows  
Lunge and flounce on the windscreen as I drive  
I am glad of the accident of being alive.

There are so many nights with stars or closely interleaved with battleship-grey or plum,  
So many visitors whose Buddha-like palms are pressed  
Against the windowpanes where people take their rest.

Whose favour now is yours to screen your sleep—  
You need not hear the strings that are tuning for the dawn—  
Mingling, my dear, your breath with the quiet breath  
Of Sleep whom the old writers called the brother of Death.

## Christmas Shopping

Spending beyond their income on gifts for Christmas—  
Swing doors and crowded lifts and draperied jungles—  
What shall we buy for our husbands and sons  
    Different from last year?

Foxes hang by their noses behind plate glass—  
Scream of macaws across festoons of paper—  
Only the faces on the boxes of chocolates are free  
    From boredom and crowsfeet.

Sometimes a chocolate box girl escapes in the flesh,  
Lightly manoeuvres the crowd, trilling with laughter;  
After a couple of years her feet and her brain will  
    Tire like the others.

The great windows marshal their troops for assault on the  
    purse,  
Something-and-eleven the yard, hoodwinking logic,  
The eleventh hour draining the gurgling pennies  
    Down to the conduits

Down to the sewers of money—rats and marshgas—  
Bubbling in maundering music under the pavement;  
Here go the hours of routine, the weight on our eyelids—  
    Pennies on corpses'.

While over the street in the centrally heated public  
Library dwindling figures with sloping shoulders  
And hands in pockets, weighted in the boots like chess-  
    men,  
Stare at the printed

Columns of ads, the quickset road to riches,  
Starting at a little and temporary but once we're  
Started who knows whether we shan't continue,  
    Salaries rising,

Rising like a salmon against the bullnecked river,  
Bound for the spawning-ground of care-free days—  
Good for a fling before the golden wheels run  
    Down to a standstill.

And Christ is born—The nursery glad with baubles,  
Alive with light and washable paint and children's  
Eyes expects as its due the accidental  
    Loot of a system.

Smell of the South—oranges in silver paper,  
Dates and ginger, the benison of firelight,  
The blue flames dancing round the brandied raisins,  
    Smiles from above them,

Hands from above them as of gods but really  
These their parents, always seen from below, them-  
Selves are always anxious looking across the  
    Fence to the future—

Out there lies the future gathering quickly  
Its blank momentum; through the tubes of London  
The dead winds blow the crowds like beasts in flight from  
    Fire in the forest.

The little firtrees palpitate with candles  
In hundreds of chattering households where the suburb  
Straggles like nervous handwriting, the margin  
    Blotted with smokestacks.

Further out on the coast the lighthouse moves its  
Arms of light through the fog that wads our welfare,  
Moves its arms like a giant at Swedish drill whose  
Mind is a vacuum. .

## Bagpipe Music

It's no go the merrygoround, it's no go the rickshaw,  
All we want is a limousine and a ticket for the peepshow.  
Their knickers are made of crêpe-de-chine, their shoes are  
made of python,  
Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with  
heads of bison.

John MacDonald found a corpse, put it under the sofa,  
Waited till it came to life and hit it with a poker,  
Sold its eyes for souvenirs, sold its blood for whiskey,  
Kept its bones for dumb-bells to use when he was fifty.

It's no go the Yogi-Man, it's no go Blavatsky,  
All we want is a bank balance and a bit of skirt in a  
taxi.

Annie MacDougall went to milk, caught her foot in the  
heather,  
Woke to hear a dance record playing of Old Vienna.  
It's no go your maidenheads, it's no go your culture,  
All we want is a Dunlop tyre and the devil mend the  
puncture.

The Laird o' Phelps spent Hogmanay declaring he was  
sober,  
Counted his feet to prove the fact and found he had one  
foot over.  
Mrs. Carmichael had her fifth, looked at the job with  
repulsion,  
Said to the midwife 'Take it away; I'm through with  
over-production'.

It's no go the gossip column, it's no go the Ceilidh,  
All we want is a mother's help and a sugar-stick for the  
    baby.

Willie Murray cut his thumb, couldn't count the damage,  
Took the hide of an Ayrshire cow and used it for a  
    bandage.

His brother caught three hundred cran when the seas  
    were lavish,  
Threw the bleeders back in the sea and went upon the  
    parish.

It's no go the Herring Board, it's no go the Bible,  
All we want is a packet of fags when our hands are idle.

It's no go the picture palace, it's no go the stadium,  
It's no go the country cot with a pot of pink geraniums.  
It's no go the Government grants, it's no go the elections,  
Sit on your arse for fifty years and hang your hat on a  
    pension.

It's no go my honey love, it's no go my poppet;  
Work your hands from day to day, the winds will blow the  
    profit.

The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will fall for  
    ever,  
But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the  
    weather.

## Rugby Football Excursion

Euston—the smell of soot and fish and petrol;  
Then in the train jogging and jogging,  
The sheaf of wires from pole to pole beside us  
Dogging the fancy northward

And waking to board the *Hibernia*—Bass and Guinness,  
Bull-necks and brogues and favours  
And Kerry-coloured girls; the whole excursion  
Savours of twelve years back

Back to my adolescence, back to Ireland,  
'Ilkla Moor ba't a't' from Midland voices,  
And Wicklow apricot in early sunshine  
Rejoices what was jaded.

Horse-cabs and outside cars—the ballyhoo for trippers—  
And College Park reposeful behind the railings;  
Emphatic old ladies' voices in a lounge lamenting  
Failings of health and budgets.

Lansdowne Road—the swirl of faces, flags,  
Gilbert and Sullivan music, emerald jerseys;  
Spire and crane beyond remind the mind on furlough  
Of Mersey's code and Rome's.

Eccentric scoring—Nicholson, Marshall and Unwin,  
Replies by Bailey and Daly;  
Rugs around our shins, the effortless place-kick  
Gaily carving the goalposts.

Then tea and toast with Fellows and Bishops in a huge  
Regency room in the warmth of a classic assurance

Looking on Stephen's Green where they blew up George  
the Second—  
Endurance of one-way thinking.

And then a walk through Dublin down the great  
Grey streets broad and straight and drowned in twilight,  
Statues of poets and Anglo-Irish patriots—  
High lights of merged traditions.

Junkshops, the smell of poverty, pubs at the corner,  
A chimney on fire and street on street of broken  
Fanlights over the doors of tenement houses—  
Token of the days of Reason.

In a frame from Sir Isaac Newton the dusk of Ireland  
Bathes the children whipping their tops on the cobbles  
Or swinging by ropes from a lamp post while a cripple  
Hobbles like a Hogarth sketch.

These I must leave, rejoin the beery trippers  
Whose other days prefer today delirious  
Packing the bar on the boat, while a sapphire pinhead  
Sirius marks Dun Laoghaire.

# Epilogue

*For W. H. Auden*

Now the winter nights begin  
Lonely comfort walls me in;  
So before the memory slip  
I review our Iceland trip—

Not for me romantic nor  
Idyll on a mythic shore  
But a fancy turn, you know,  
Sandwiched in a graver show.

Down in Europe Seville fell,  
Nations germinating hell,  
The Olympic games were run—  
Spots upon the Aryan sun.

And the don in me set forth  
How the landscape of the north  
Had educed the saga style  
Plodding forward mile by mile.

And the don in you replied  
That the North begins inside,  
Our ascetic guts require  
Breathers from the Latin fire.

So although no ghost was scotched  
We were happy while we watched  
Ravens from their walls of shale  
Cruise around the rotting whale,

Watched the sulphur basins boil,  
Loops of steam uncoil and coil,  
While the valley fades away  
To a sketch of Judgment Day.

So we rode and joked and smoked  
With no miracles evoked,  
With no levitations won  
In the thin unreal sun;

In that island never found  
Visions blossom from the ground,  
No conversions like St. Paul,  
No great happenings at all.

Holidays should be like this,  
Free from over-emphasis,  
Time for soul to stretch and spit  
Before the world comes back on it,

Before the chimneys row on row  
Sneer in smoke, 'We told you so'  
And the fog-bound sirens call  
Ruin to the long sea-wall.

Rows of books around me stand,  
Fence me round on either hand;  
Through that forest of dead words  
I would hunt the living birds—

Great black birds that fly alone  
Slowly through a land of stone,  
And the gulls who weave a free  
Quilt of rhythm on the sea.

Here in Hampstead I sit late  
Nights which no one shares and wait  
For the 'phone to ring or for  
Unknown angels at the door;

Better were the northern skies  
Than this desert in disguise—  
Rugs and cushions and the long  
Mirror which repeats the song.

For the litany of doubt  
From these walls comes breathing out  
Till the room becomes a pit  
Humming with the fear of it

With the fear of loneliness  
And uncommunicableness;  
All the wires are cut, my friends  
Live beyond the severed ends.

So I write these lines for you  
Who have felt the death-wish too,  
But your lust for life prevails—  
Drinking coffee, telling tales.

Our prerogatives as men  
Will be cancelled who knows when ;  
Still I drink your health before  
The gun-butt raps upon the door.

